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AUTHOR Baghban, Marcia
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a graduate course using biographical materials for teachers to work through their understandings of reading and writing as personal, valuable processes. The course consists of three parts; each session begins with the reading of a children's picture book that deals with reading and writing; next, the class reads the recollections of several famous authors, such as Jack London, Eudora Welty, and James Agee; and finally, each member of the class works on a personal life story to share in class. The paper lists some of the picture books used in the course as: Chris Van Allsburg's "The Wretched Stone"; Patricia Polacco's "Aunt Chip and the Great Triple Creek Dam Affair"; Marie Bradby's "More Than Anything Else"; William Miller's "Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree"; and Zora Hurston's "Mules and Men." A question on the final exam asked how life stories specifically helped teachers; teachers' answers fell into two categories--what they learned about reading and writing, and what they learned to help children in learning to read and write. Contains 23 references. (CR)

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CONVERSATIONS WHICH EXTEND THE LEARNING CONTEXTS FOR LITERACY

Using Life Stories

Paper presented at the 17th World Congress on Reading
Ocho Rios, Jamaica, July 11-14, 1998

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Dr. Marcia Baghban
Associate Professor
Elementary Education
Queens College, The City
University of New York
65-30 Kissena Boulevard
Flushing, NY 11367
U.S.A.
(718) 460-1176
MB72042@aol.com

CS216375

Conversations Which Extend the Learning Contexts for Literacy: Using Life Stories

The biographies and autobiographies of authors are literacy success stories. Their lives are rich, full ethnographies that provide descriptive data on the learning of literacy. We know where their childhood experiences went. We know why they decided to choose writing as a profession.

For these reasons, I designed a graduate course using biographical materials for teachers to work through their understandings of reading and writing as personal, valuable processes. The course consisted of three parts. First, I began each session with the reading of a children's picture book that deals with reading and writing. Next, we read the recollections of several famous authors. Finally, we worked on one of our own life stories to share in class.

Picture Books

I began one class by reading aloud Chris Van Allsburg's The Wretched Stone and another with Patricia Polacco's Aunt Chip and the Great Triple Creek Dam Affair to prompt discussions about the role of reading in human life and television's encroachment on our time for reading. I then followed with Marie Bradby's More Than Anything Else which documents Booker T. Washington's strong desire to read, his modeling of a newspaper man who teaches him to read and write, and his entrance into the written system through the practice of his own name.

To make additional connections to writing, I shared William Miller's Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree. This picture book portrays a small town and its rich

African American oral tradition as the context in which the future anthropologist grows up. It documents the encouragement Zora's mother provides by telling her to climb the chinaberry tree and look beyond the town borders. As an actual adult, Zora Hurston roamed the southern United States and recorded African American folktales. Her Mules and Men became a classic collection of oral tradition. From her example, the class then discussed the connections between oral and written traditions, motivation for writing, and professional role models for women.

Authors' Life Stories

Along with the picture book readings and discussions, a second component of the course dealt with the lives of selected authors. We learned how Jack London, on a whaler to Japan, took the bunk of a shipmate who had just died, despite the superstitions of the crew, so he could read nearer the only light. We learned how Alice Walker became an avid reader after her brothers accidentally blinded her in one eye, and how her writing helped her handle thoughts of suicide. We learned how Isaac Asimov wrote every day from 7:30 a.m. to 10 p.m., and how family members brought him food. An assigned book, One Writer's Beginnings, by the Pulitzer Prize-winning author Eudora Welty is the recollection of her childhood in Mississippi. Eudora experienced a nearly ideal literacy learning environment which would support her development as a writer. Her parents modeled reading. In particular, her mother was an avid reader. Eudora tells us that her mother "...read Dickens in the spirit in which she would have eloped with him" (Welty, 1991, p. 7). Moreover, when her mother was a girl, her mother's parents believed, as many did at the time, that long hair sapped a

child's strength. They offered Eudora's mother gold earrings to let them cut her hair. She refused until they offered her a complete set of Charles Dickens shipped up the river in a barrel to their home. Eudora's mother valued these books even as a married adult. When her own house was on fire, she climbed on crutches with a broken leg to the second floor, threw the volumes out the window to her husband, and only then jumped to safety herself. Eudora knew when she saw the set of Dickens that the books were waiting just for her.

In addition to modeling reading and saving her books for Eudora, Eudora's mother introduced her to reading by reading aloud to her. Eudora remembers:

> I learned that from the age of two or three that any room in our house, at any time of day, was there to read in, or to be read to. My mother read to me. She'd read to me in the big bedroom in the mornings, when we were in the rocker together, which ticked in rhythm as we rocked, as though we had a cricket accompanying the story. She'd read to me in the diningroom on winter afternoons in front of the coal fire, with our cuckoo clock ending the story with 'Cuckoo', and at night when I'd got in my own bed. I must have given her no peace (Welty, 1991, p. 5).

Given such immersion in listening to stories from books and the easy availability of books, Eudora wanted to learn to read and practice reading herself. She begged her parents to teach her the alphabet, and her mother pressured the principal to take Eudora into the local grammar school when she was five years old. When Eudora was seven years old, she stayed out of school for nearly a year for what the doctor called,

a "fast-beating heart". She credits this extended period of silent reading in bed with the discovery of her own author's voice. She writes:

> Ever since I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line that I didn't HEAR. As my eyes followed the sentence, a voice was saying it silently to me. It isn't my mother's voice, or the voice of any person I can identify, certainly not my own. It is human, but inward, and it is inwardly that I listen of it. It is to me the voice of the story or the poem itself...My own words, when I am at work on a story, I hear too as they go, in the same voice that i hear when I read in books. When I write and the sound of it comes back to my ears, then I act to make my changes. I have always trusted this voice (Welty, 1991, pp. 12-13)

The reader's voice aided Eudora's leap to her writer's voice and the profession she chose when she grew up. She wrote almost exclusively from life situations. She remains in her family's Mississippi home today and calls herself, "a writer who came of a sheltered life" (Welty, 1991, p. 114) who chose to live at home to do her writing in a familiar world and never regretted it (Prenshaw, 1984, p. 131).

James Agee's life was at the opposite extreme of the emotional spectrum. We watched the PBS videotape of "Agee" which was nominated for an Academy Award. In this video, we learned about his life through his own writings read aloud and through interviews with friends. When Agee was a child in Tennessee, his father died in an auto accident en route to visit his grandfather who had a sudden heart attack.

The subject of his father's death became his book A Death in the Family, often required in English courses. His mother was extremely religious and the two of them spent long summers in religious retreats. Agee left Tennessee to go to prep school in the Northeast and later to Harvard. At Harvard he did a parody of Time magazine that so impressed Henry Luce that he offered Agee a job after college. While living in New York, Agee wrote for Fortune and was offered the assignment of a story on white sharecroppers in Georgia. From this venture he published Now Let Us Praise Famous Men which won the Pulitzer Prize. When Agee returned to New York, John Huston, touched by Agee's insight in a review of one of his movies, invited Agee to join him in California to write the screenplay for the film "The African Queen". Throughout these adventures, the nomadic Agee lived on alcohol, cigarettes, and three hours of sleep. He married three times, and produced lists of topics about which to write. He never spent twenty-four hours without writing, yet was never able to limit his topics to produce the amount of writing he wanted. His third wife observed that "Writing was like a master in his life. He couldn't get away from it." His own view of writing describes an impossible perfection. He states, "Nothing else holds me in the same way. It is a horrible definiteness, an unhealthy obsession. If I could make it what it ought to be made, I would not be human." He died of a heart attack in a New York City taxi at age 45.

The teachers contrasted the pleasure, discipline, and scope in Welty's life to the lack of satisfaction, discipline, and scope in Agee's life. We talked about creative people, tortured artists, what it means to become a writer, and writing as a coping

mechanism. Eventually, we talked about writing in classrooms. We shared experiences with writing-process and book-making, and guessed why so many child-authors declared that they wanted to grow up to become writers. We debated whether we were justified in encouraging young children to write when their adult lives might be as difficult as many of the writers' lives we were reading.

Our Life Stories

Finally, after our reading and talking, we decided to make our own plunge into writing, the third component of the course. Our class brainstormed life experiences about which we might write. I put the suggestions on the chalkboard and then, as an example, chose one topic and told a story from my own life. Next, several teachers chose from our list of topics: the vacation from hell, in-laws, the first day of teaching, children, ESP, death, marriage, etc., and told us their stories. By the end of the class, the teachers drafted experiences which they knew they would share with the class. I handed out folders in which I kept their drafts. As the class ended, they wrote a working title on their pieces if they had not done so. I collected the folders.

At the beginning of the next class, I wrote the steps for the class to follow on the board and passed out their folders. The teachers paired up and read their stories aloud. With this step, they only listened to each other. The partners commented on the title, beginning, ending, and any places where understanding might be difficult. Next, the teachers revised and rewrote based on the feedback from their listening audience. When the pieces were rewritten so that anyone could read them, the teachers exchanged their written pieces. I distributed editing sheets, and circulated to help with

editing and revising. We had dictionaries and grammars in class. When the teachers were satisfied after more rewrites, they formed small groups to share their stories. The class understood that the editing groups were to be receptive and constructive. Our goal was to make all the stories sharper.

The following week the class sat in a large circle and we had an authors' party. I was among the authors, for I had been writing a story as well. I had a writing buddy, participated in editing groups, and I was ready to share my story. The author's party was a poignant class. We laughed at the many funny ways members of the class got engaged. We shared the extreme embarrassment of the bride who turned at the altar, stepped on her train, and ripped off the back of her wedding gown in front of an entire congregation of family and friends. We gasped at the story of the tent pitched in thick fog at the edge of what turned out to be a dangerous ravine when the fog lifted. We wondered about the dead aunt who seemed to help her niece find the aunt's bracelet for the niece to wear for a New Year's Eve party. We shared the passings of parents and grandparents, and learned the painful moment that one student had to strain over a hospital counter to read upside down a physician's diagnosis of her leukemia. As this student shared her story with our class, she started to cry. Her neighboring classmate gently took her piece and finished reading it for her. When the story was finished, we all had tears in our eyes. The life stories that we shared had made us authors just as the life stories of the famous had helped define them as authors and helped us define their authorship. The teachers handed in typed versions of their

stories and I compiled them into a class book which was reproduced and distributed at the end of the course.

So What Did We Learn?

How did life stories specifically help us? I asked the teachers this question on their final exam. Their observations fell into two categories: what they learned about reading and writing, and what they learned to help children read and write.

First, about the processes, the teachers learned that writers are big-time readers, and that they treasured bonds with particular books. The writers started to read early in life. Importantly, they learned HOW to read. They listened to the words they read. In their heads, they heard the music, color, and variations of language. This sensitivity provided the moment when each said, "I can do this." With such a decision, a reader became a writer. The writers not only applied the language they had seen and heard in books, but also they remembered, selected, composed, edited, performed, and listened to their own choices to discover their own voices. Their reading inspired their writing. Moreover, they were motivated to become readers and writers by either extremely positive or extremely negative life experiences, and they soon took control of their literacy learning. They had an intense desire to write; they could not live without doing so; they wrote every day.

Second, about children and literacy, the teachers learned that to help children become writers, they must expose children to many wonderful books. They needed to help children become constant, voracious readers because reading presents the conventions of language, variations in writing styles, and well-expressed ideas. By

reading aloud and discussing the impact of authors' word choices and organizational decisions, teachers knew they could heighten children's sensitivity to language and story. In this way, they felt, children learned not only to read but also how to read. When these conventions, styles, and ideas made strong impressions, readers decided that they could write. Once readers wrote, they learned about writing.

Meanwhile, during our course, the teachers showed their students the benefits of writing and explored life experiences about which to write. They suggested ways to handle writer's block and promoted authorship through book-making, or fluency with journal writing. They found the time in class to let children write every day and to develop a true author's voice. And, if any moment was left, they could now share with the children their favorite stories from the lives of authors.

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